

From A to Zen – Exploring the Wisdom of China – Part 4 of 7

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Cultural Differences

When I recently told my Chinese friend that I was writing a series exploring the wisdom of China she responded frankly that, as a foreigner, I couldn't really know much about it. I agreed. But she said this with such a certainty that I was taken aback by it. In an instant, many thoughts crossed my mind. Was I being pretentious in attempting to write about a culture with thousands of years of history? Was I deluded in thinking I could contribute to an understanding of the Far Eastern Way of life, as a foreigner from the West who has barely lived in China for a year? Perhaps, but to save myself I replied that all I am offering is a Western perspective on what has been written and recorded from the Land of the Dragon; a tiny window through which some of the ideas can be glanced that have shaped Chinese society and that distinguish it from that in other parts of the world.

In fact, being a foreigner is in some ways an advantage. If you are immersed in one way of life, there is sometimes not really that much of interest you can say about it. But as soon you compare it to other ways, then, suddenly, the traditions, customs and ideas appear in a different light: more relative; and then you start asking why is this so and why is that different and where does it come from?

The way of understanding then becomes a comparative approach, involving comparing and contrasting. The scholar Alan Watts, for instance looked at the Western (or Abrahamic), the Indian, and the Far Eastern philosophies and religions to shed more light on the Chinese World view, a method known as triangulation. But even without being too scholarly about it, simple comparisons can yield interesting results.

Billiard Balls and Water

In the West we have gone to the greatest lengths to create an integrated, coherent, and cohesive scientific framework that allows us to understand the world, or perhaps only gives us the illusion to do so. Watts called this "the engineering model of the universe". This is a model where mind and matter are separated, time is linear, and causation is logical and calculable. According to this model the entire history and future of the universe could be established if at any one time one would know the mass, velocity, and direction of every particle within it. The premise is that matter is inherently without intelligence and entirely determined by universal physical and other laws. This is a rational universe where a thousand monkeys with a thousand typewriters would eventually write the Encyclopaedia Britannica just because of the laws of probability and statistics. In this world, we are all mere billiard

balls which are played by external forces and governed by universal rules. The fact that we experience ourselves as intelligent and sentient beings is similarly due to impersonal laws that govern the process of evolution through selection, mutation, adaptation and so on.

Being so sure about many of the assumptions we hold about the world is in some ways an asset, but in others an impediment. In the search for wisdom we might be deceived and restrained by what we have come to accept as knowledge and truth.

Lao Tzu, who between the 6th and 3rd century BC wrote the influential Tao Te Ching, the prime text of Taoism, said:

“The scholar learns something every day; the man of Tao unlearns something every day, until he gets back to non-doing.”

Why unlearn? Perhaps because we predetermine the world we perceive through the ideas we hold about it. We can only see what we know and expect, and our actions will be affected by this. If we see the earth as inanimate, unintelligent matter, it is no wonder that we treat it in that way: carelessly and exploitatively. If we see ourselves as billiard balls, it will be difficult to move in other than in straight lines (save the spin and trick-shots). If we see ourselves as separated individuals, we will behave in that way.

At the core of Taoism we find the interconnectedness of everything, even seeming opposites, as expressed in the Ying and Yang symbol. But to go into Taoism in the first place, we have to let go of everything we have learnt and every assumption we hold. We should return to what we were when we were babies - very alive but plainly ignorant. Alan Watts offers this analogy to make the point that in the Taoist universe there are no distinctions and separations; the thought arising in the mind, the cry of the seagull, and the noise of a car outside are all born out of one and the same nature, the Tao. It is misleading to say *this* comes from me and *that* comes from the external world

Tao basically means “way” or “course” and so, the course of nature. Lao Tzu said that the way of the Tao is “so of itself”, in other words: spontaneous. It is not orderly like the Western conception of the universe with its physical, mathematical and geometrical structures, but it is neither purely chaotic. It is more organic, if you like. In this way of looking at things, there is no difference between what you do and what is happening to you. Just as your thought happens, the car outside happens and everything else happens.

While in the Newtonian Universe we are rendered as billiard balls, in the *New Taonian* (excuse the pun) universe it helps to see ourselves as currents of water, water being the great metaphor for the Tao.

If we leave the theoretical realm and visit everyday life, this becomes instructive. Taking part in the local Dalian traffic, be it in whatever way, as a pedestrian, cyclist, or driver, it helps immensely if you see and feel yourself as

a current of water rather than a billiard ball; sometimes flowing fast, sometimes slow, sometimes caught up in a whirlpool, sometimes, being made to drift off to the side and stagnate for a while, sometimes coming to a complete standstill, etc. The important thing is to go with the flow, to be aware and spontaneous; to leave the ego behind and blend in, to trust in the water-like nature of all the other participants and just be part of this great current swirling through the streets and roads of the city.

There is this old story of the woman who was washing clothes at a river. The river was wild and ferocious and full of whirlpools and fast currents; it was deep and flowing fast. A bit further up the river she saw an old Taoist sage with a long beard walking over a footbridge when suddenly he slipped and fell into the water. The woman cried out in horror and covered her face with her hands. She couldn't see the old man anywhere; no trace of him. She got up worriedly and strained her eyes to see something, but there was no sign. She feared the worst. Then, suddenly, a few hundred yards down the river the man reappeared. He casually lifted himself out of the water on the side of the river at a big stone and went on walking, wet, but seemingly unharmed and rather unimpressed. He continued his way. The woman couldn't believe her eyes.

If you go with the flow and move with the currents then you will be one with them and go unharmed. Don't try to resist and move against the Tao; move in harmony with it and your life will be easier.

Temples and Churches

On the surface, things can often appear similar while on a deeper level there might be fundamental differences. Take for example places of worship. In the West we have churches that serve these ends. Here in China there are temples devoted to various deities and legendary figures. It occurred to me when I was hiking on Da Hei Shan, the big black mountain in Dalian's development zone, Kaifaqu, that while temples and churches can be compared in function, there is a big difference with regards to their locations. Go to any European village, town or city for instance and you will find a church, abbey, or cathedral, usually centrally located, if not at the very centre of the town. Temples in China, on the other hand, have a tendency to be located in remote places, on distant hill tops, on the sides of mountains, accessible only via steep paths and steps.

Joseph Campbell, who was a scholar in the fields of myth, ritual, and comparative religion once said that to see where the power lies in a society one has to see who has the tallest buildings; in the West this was for a long time the Churches, before they were topped by business and trade buildings and then banks. But far from only reflecting power structures within society, churches in their entirety traditionally represent the model of the universe which is at the heart of the Western belief system, a cosmic monarchy, with God being the patriarch, lord, father, judge, and sole ruler, standing apart from

his creation and governing over it. If we go inside a church, this monarchic analogy can be continued.

In a lecture titled *Democracy in the Kingdom of Heaven*, Alan Watts describes the following: “The design of a catholic church is based upon the design of the courtroom of a King. Ancient roman churches are called Basilica, meaning the throne room of a king, the altar being the throne of god. The King, because he governs over others, needs to watch out. That's why he has his back against a wall and is flanked by guards and ministers of state. And to prevent anybody from making trouble he has them on their knees or flat on the ground when they come into his presence. This is the model upon which the Judeo-Christian idea of God is based and as such, a typical church, too: a political model. As a result, Christians are related to God as subjects are to a king.”

In China, however, there is no comparable tradition of monotheism and therefore no centrally governed world, no distinction between a creator and his creation and no politically inspired churches and cathedrals. Instead, here we have in Taoism a model of a self governing universe which is “so-of-itself”, not having been created, but having grown, not separated into mind and matter, but alive and “intelligent” in all its aspects, not orderly in terms of man made categories and specifications, but organically-orderly, like the grain in wood, the markings in jade, and the patterns of flowing water. This universe is not following any divine development plan, has no anticipation of Judgement Day or the apocalypse, and is not intended to test the piety of individual beings; rather, it is without purpose and intent, devoid of any divine meaning; it exists from moment to moment and engages us spontaneously.

This might sound nihilistic to some people or just awfully empty and meaningless to others. However, it must not be so. Watts often compared this view of life to dancing. When you dance, you do not dance with a purpose in mind other than just to dance. You don't set out to finish at a certain point in the room in a certain posture. You don't aim at dancing the fastest and being finished first. No, you dance just for the sake of dancing, perhaps even to loose yourself in the dance and be nothing but the dance, just for the moment. This is the idea of life, too.